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2011

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A Virtual Conversation with Sigmund Freud

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Citation for this article:
Abstract

Sigmund Freud, the most significant and influential figure in the history of psychology, had a lot to say about happiness. His comments on happiness, particularly in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, addressed concerns that are still current today. This article, which takes the form of an imagined conversation with Freud, includes quotations of Freud and paraphrases of his writings.
Introduction

After World War II, American psychology focused on treating mental illness, and great progress was made in understanding and treating psychological disorders. However, the focus on human weakness meant that little attention was given to the other side of the equation (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). In recent years much attention has been paid to positive psychology, the attempt to study positive human attributes and develop interventions to promote human flourishing (Seligman, 1998). One major focus of concern in positive psychology is happiness: what is happiness, and how can counselors and psychotherapists help clients become more happy?

One of the new models of happiness proposes that a person’s happiness level is determined by three factors: a genetically-determined set-point for happiness, circumstantial factors, and activities that affect happiness. This model is based on research that suggests that genetics accounts for 50% of population variance for happiness, life circumstances accounts for 10%, and intentional activity accounts for 40% (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). So this model recognizes that while 60% of our happiness is beyond our control, 40% is subject to our own efforts to become more happy. While there is little definitive research on exactly what we should do to become more happy, suggestions usually include such things as having plenty of friends, belonging to supportive groups, helping others, and keeping a gratitude journal (Myers, 2000). Strategies for promoting happiness should address three of life’s domains: love, work, and play (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

When Freud was writing his books in the early 1900’s he was aware that everyone seeks the goal of happiness, and he wrote about how to define happiness, reasonable
expectations regarding how happy humans can be, activities that promote happiness, and how psychotherapy can help clients pursue happiness. Compared to much that is written about happiness today, Freud’s ideas are quite profound and deserve careful consideration. Although Freud might be accused of being pessimistic regarding the potential for human happiness, it must be remembered that he was writing at a time when there were few effective treatments for any of the psychological disorders. It must have seemed that happiness was a somewhat frivolous topic, given the pressing need to help the many people suffering from mental illness.

Freud suggested that we should seek happiness through love and through work. His opinion was that satisfying love relationships and creative, productive work hold the most value for the person who seeks to be happy. This accords well with the findings of the positive psychologists from the past few years. Freud cautioned against pursuing happiness through hedonism, drug and alcohol use, and retreat from the world. He recommended being active in one’s community and working for the good of all. Freud also wrote that we should realize there is no one-size-fits-all prescription for happiness.

Counselors will find several practical implications of Freud’s ideas about happiness. For example, clients should have reasonable expectations about how much control they have over their own happiness. They should seek to resolve bothersome personal problems while they pursue happiness, and get psychotherapy if they need assistance. They should also specifically work on improving their work lives and their love lives. Freud suggested that even though happiness is a difficult goal, it is in our nature to pursue it, and we must not give up the effort.
Dr. Freud, thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me.

That's quite all right. What would you like to know?

What is the meaning of life?

"This question has been raised countless times and has never yet received a satisfactory answer, so we have a right to dismiss it." [1]

What do you think of the pursuit of happiness?

"The intention that man should be happy is not in the plan of Creation.” [2]

What do you say when a patient asks how you propose to help him or her?

"Much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness." [3]

What is the purpose of psychoanalysis?

The goal of psychoanalysis is to cure gratuitous or self-imposed suffering (neurosis) in order to restore "common" or "ordinary" unhappiness. It is not a cure for fate or a remedy for the human condition. [4]

What is your book Civilization and Its Discontents about?
The book's central theme is the frustration of man's perennial search for happiness. In fact, my original title for the book was "Unhappiness in Civilization." People show by their behavior that the purpose and intention of their lives is happiness. "People strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so." [5]

What is happiness?

The endeavor to become happy has two sides, a positive and a negative. "It aims, on the one hand, at the absence of pain and unpleasure, and, on the other, at the experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure." In its narrowest sense, happiness is the sensation of pleasure. "What decides the purpose of life is the program of the pleasure principle, the effort to maximize pleasurable sensations." [6]

So the pleasure principle motivates us to seek pleasure?

Yes, but a secondary process I call the reality principle constrains human beings to curb their crude desires for pleasure. The child learns to regulate his demands for immediate gratification and postpone present enjoyment for the sake of later rewards. We weigh the costs and benefits in order to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. [7]

The demand for pleasure is forever at war with reality?

Yes, and it is a battle that the pleasure principle is destined to lose. "There is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it." [8]
Why is the struggle for happiness doomed?

For two reasons. One is because human desire is insatiable. "What we call happiness comes from the satisfaction of needs which have been dammed up to a high degree. By its nature it is an episodic phenomenon. When any pleasurable situation is prolonged, it only produces a feeling of mild contentment, and then trails off. When one's thirst is slaked, the satisfaction of drink declines. We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things. Thus our possibilities are already restricted by our constitutions." [9]

And the other reason the struggle for happiness is doomed?

Because of the nature of being in the world. The conditions of existence match our infinite desire for pleasure with infinite possibilities for pain. We are threatened with suffering from three sources: our own body, the external world, and finally from our relations to other people. "The suffering which comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other." [10]

So to some extent we suffer simply because we live in society?

Yes, the renunciation of erotic and aggressive impulses demanded by civilization exacts a heavy price. Humans are as ready to regard their neighbor as an enemy as a friend to be loved. "Man is a wolf to man." Society constrains the desire to satisfy aggressiveness on others, but it does so only by redirecting that aggression within. The result is frustration, anxiety, and displaced guilt. "The price we pay for our advance in
civilization is a loss of happiness. Civilized man exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security." [11]

What are some of the ways that people pursue happiness?

One is hedonism. "The unrestricted satisfaction of every need presents itself as the most enticing method of conducting one's life, but it means putting enjoyment before caution, and soon brings its own punishment." [12]

What did you learn from your use of cocaine?

The crudest, but also the most effective means of avoiding suffering is the chemical one, but it falls prey to similar drawbacks. Substances that allow the user to withdraw from the pressure of reality are dangerously attractive and potentially harmful, and waste much energy that might be far better employed. [13]

What about pursuing happiness by withdrawing from society?

"Voluntary isolation is the strategy of the hermit. This might secure the happiness of quietude, but it is an admission of defeat. Against the dreaded external world one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it. The same is true of killing off the instincts as is prescribed by the worldly wisdom of the East and practiced by Yoga. If it succeeds, then the subject has given up all other activities as well - he has sacrificed his life, and only achieved the happiness of quietness. A better path is becoming a member of the human community and working for the good of all." [14]
What about pursuing happiness through the enjoyment of beauty?

The enjoyment of works of art can induce a mild narcosis, but it is a transient enjoyment. It is one of many attempts to perceive the world through imagination, illusion, or fantasy. [15]

Can religious faith promote happiness?

Religious faith is similar to the flight into fantasy of neurotic illness. The religions of humankind are mass delusions. They attempt to procure happiness and protection from suffering through a delusional remolding of reality. [16]

If none of these approaches promote happiness, then what does?

I recommend creative and productive work. Work involves sublimation and the displacement of libido. Professional activity that is freely chosen can be a source of special satisfaction. No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality. I especially like psychical and intellectual work. Work is not sufficiently prized by men as a path to happiness, and it deserves to be so. [17]

Can love promote happiness?

The strategy of loving and being loved comes naturally enough to all of us. Love is based on a yearning for the satisfactions of infancy, as well as our most intense and overwhelming sensation of pleasure - sexual love - the prototype of all happiness. Erotic love perhaps comes nearer to the goal of happiness than any other method. [18]
Does pursuing happiness through love have a downside?

Oh yes, otherwise no human being would have abandoned this path to happiness for any other. "We are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love." Much of the energy of psychoanalysis is devoted to trying to understand the daunting complexities of sustaining love in the face of its many threats. The pleasures of love are seldom uncomplicated. Love and aggression are seldom far removed. [19]

Overall, you sound pessimistic about our prospects for happiness.

"The program of becoming happy cannot be fulfilled. But we must not - indeed, we cannot - give up our efforts to bring the program of becoming happy nearer to fulfillment by some means or other."

This is the human predicament. Human beings cannot be happy, but they will struggle for happiness until the end. This is both tragic and noble. Humans refuse to succumb passively to the decrees of fate. [18]

"There are many paths which may lead to such happiness as is attainable by men, even if there is none which does so for certain." [18] Pleasure is better than pain, and there is no reason we should not seek to maximize our happiness. If we cannot remove all suffering, we can remove some, and can mitigate some. [19]

Can psychoanalysis help us be happy?

Yes, in that psychoanalysis is a means for dealing with anxiety and guilt, allowing us to learn to sublimate our aggressive and destructive impulses into healthier, more
productive behavior. "Happiness, to the extent it is possible, is a problem of the economics of the individual's libido." So there are as many paths to pleasure as there are people, each of whom has a unique psychic constitution. The predominantly erotic person would give first priority to emotional relationships, while the narcissist, who inclines toward self-sufficiency, would seek satisfaction in internal mental processes. "Just as a cautious business-man avoids tying up all his capital in one concern, we would do well not to look for the whole of our satisfaction from any single aspiration. Every man must find out for himself in what particular fashion he can be saved." [20]

Thank you for this interview.

You are most welcome.
References


